Of Silenced Narratives and Political Deceits

Exploding Hyper Nationalism in India and the Case of Kashmir

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In the ongoing drumbeat of democracy or the 'great spectacle' of the Indian elections, Indians; left, right or centre are anxiously awaiting to see whether India voted to 'save its Indian spirit', or whether it will move a step further towards being a Hindu majoritarian state. For Kashmiris, plumbing the depths of despair, the election results offer no carrot to dangle. Reflecting the current public mode in Kashmir, a local twitterati wrote, "For most of us it won't matter much. [The] Military will continue to rule the roost here [Kashmir]". The only equation to change on May 23 when the results of the election are out, wrote another twitterati, "would be how much blood will flow in Kashmir".

Kashmiris continue to live precarious lives, which becomes more strident during the gunfights between Indian forces and the rebels. On May 16, a civilian Rayees Ahmad Dar in his early 20s was killed in an encounter in Pulwama. In a separate gunfight at Shopian on the same day, another civilian, Ishtiaq Ahmad Bhat was also 'found dead at the encounter site'. Often legitimizing the civilian deaths, the state finds no dearth in constituting new terminologies, labelling the civilians killed during encounters as "overground workers" (nomenclature used by Jammu and Kashmir police to define civilians who help the rebels) or simply those "involved in militancy-related issues". The Indian state would want us to believe that "there is nothing outside of the text", there is no "extra text". In situations like these, the difference between a repetitive chronicle and a rhetorical declamation, or between fact and fiction is a loss of meaning. These are congeries of lived stories in Kashmir; individual or collective, of loss, of death, of anguish.

In fact Kashmiris rarely make it into the public discourse as three-dimensional human beings. It is only when the two nuclear warring neighbors of South Asia; India and Pakistan, are at each other's throats that the world's gaze is fixated on the Himalayan state, and its inhabitants. Since 1947, it has remained a space of desire for both the nation-states. The two nation-states have fought three wars over it, both claiming the

erstwhile princely state in its entirety. [1] With craggy complexities lurking beneath Kashmir's political landscape, an armed uprising against the Indian rule in the late 1980s engulfed the state.

Chronologically, the partition in Kashmir took place at the moment of India's and Pakistan's independence in 1947. However, Kashmir's liminal fate transcended the moment of partition, as an event taking place at a particular historical juncture, because it seems to be still living through a never-ending partition of its virtual body and soul. Tracing the genealogy of this tussle, it is safe to argue that Kashmir's narrative became intricately connected with the project of nation-state building in the South Asian context even before the partition of the Indian subcontinent, when the nationalist identity politics made Kashmir the 'test case' for other princely states[2] in terms of the constitutional relationship with the 'nation-state-in-making' during the crucial phase of decolonization. Kashmir, has since, become a populist metaphor for both Indian and Pakistani nationalism. While Kashmir becomes crucial to both the nationalisms, Kashmiris themselves sink in oblivion in the discourses concerning their own political future.

Earlier this year in February, South Asia found itself on the brink of war again. Previously, wars between India and Pakistan have been fought in 1947-1948, 1965 and 1999. A 21-year-old Kashmiri rebel, in a suicide attack on the Indian paramilitary convoy, killed at least 40 soldiers in Kashmir. The Kashmiri boy was affiliated with a terrorist organization *Jaish-e-Muhammad,* which also has a significant base in Pakistan. Post the attack, siren songs were set in motion in the Indian TV studios, from lanes and bylanes of the big and small cities. Like the howling of wolves, calls for revenge, war hysteria against Pakistan and depersonalization of Kashmiris grew louder and louder in India. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) found its nemesis; Pakistan, and the 'criminalized' Kashmiris, as sufficient fodder for its upcoming electoral campaigning.

Did the recent India-Pakistan tensions bring any changes to the status quo in Kashmir? Did it initiate any fresh dialogue on the political dispute? What didn't change on the ground, was the continued denial of a political problem that exists in Kashmir since the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Post the suicide attack, the Indian State imposed a ban on the socio-religious organization, *Jamat-i-Islami,* which it claimed, propagates Kashmir's merger with Pakistan. A ban on a 'secular' political organization, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front seeking the formation of an independent Kashmir, was also put into place. Incapacitated by the war hysteria, endless restrictions including a ban on the civilian traffic traversing the national highway for two days a week paving the way to the smooth movement of the Indian Army Convoy across Kashmir only served as a reminder how the State contributes to symbolic violence. Through the rituals and mechanism of control, a replay of the colonial practice of mapping/marking the defiant body by 'stamping permission onto the human body', [3] to travel in her own homeland, brought home the reality that it is both taxable, and a 'policeable' highway. The dehumanizing atmosphere, of the constant show of control and violence, has in fact created in Kashmir, certain kind of "ruins" [4] and Kashmiri body becomes the site symbolizing this process of ruination. Violence is experienced in its everydayness through a multiple shows of control over the Kashmiri body, whether through physical coercion or for example by limiting their movement. Pierre Bourdieu's work only reminds us how structures of domination are not ahistorical but are products of incessant historical labor of reproduction to which institutions such as the state contribute immensely.

The issue of violence, whether in its physical form, or the 'symbolic violence' is related in many ways to exercising power over others. Hannah Arendt in her powerful essays on violence makes a crucial distinction between the often collated terms, power and violence. In her work, she would note that "power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance." Arendt while making a distinction between the two categories at the same time does recognize that sometimes power needs violence to maintain itself even be it as a "last resort to keep the power structure intact". This allows one to understand how the power structure works and maintains a deep vigil over the bodies, the bodies who often question the state structure, its occupation, and its control over the individuals. Is Indian State's presence in Kashmir essentially a "dominance without hegemony"?

Discussions on Kashmir only made a resurgence in the Indian political spaces during the ongoing Indian electoral campaigns. But why does Kashmir become a populist metaphor in the Indian nationalist debates, whether Hindu or 'secular'? The answer partly lies in the conception of the history of India that the Hindu nationalists uphold. India's geographical extent including what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh, imagined as "*Bharatvarsha*", is seen as an ontological reality of the Indian subcontinent. As an extension of this view (product of 19th century colonial epistemologies itself), Kashmir historically and geographically is "admittedly an integral part and parcel of India or the *Bharatvarsha*." [5] Thus, they ensconce themselves as the de facto rulers of Kashmir. The All India Hindu Mahasabha in the 1950s reiterated, 'it was improper on the part of those who now wield the reins of Government of India after Partition to have raised an altogether new issue by a mistake and misplaced reference to the doctrine of self-determination, and further to have given it the appearance of an international question by consenting to its [Kashmir problem] solution, by the United Nations Organization.' [6] Such a viewpoint still reverberates in the Indian political spaces, more vociferously in BJP's political discourse.

The last few years have consequently seen a rise in the bunker mentality in India. Nationalism, hyper-nationalism, regarding discussion about being "national" and "anti-national", have all become everyday catchalls in Indian mainland. Nationalism as an inspiration figures prominently in BJP's election manifestos and in their political discourses. So does Kashmir. The BJP sees the Kashmiri resistance to Indian governmentalities as intolerable dissidence, stigmatizing the eternally voiceless Kashmiri, who becomes a target of hatred because of his struggle for the right to self-determination, as well as for his 'Muslimness'. Like the 2014 election manifesto, the Bharatiya Janata Party has advocated an end to Kashmir's 'special' constitutional status, which prevents Indians from buying property in Kashmir. BJP argues such 'laws have hindered its integration with the rest of India'

Kashmir's history is replete with such pressures, the only changing variable in the equation is the degree of state violence that the Kashmiris are exposed to. The first such organized movement against the 'special constitutional status' came from within the state of Jammu and Kashmir itself, in the form of the *Praja Parishad* movement based in Jammu, in the 1950s, who 'wanted the Indian Constitution to be the supreme organic law for Jammu and Kashmir'. 'The policy of duality of flags, presidents and constitutions', they believed, 'was not an act of fidelity to India'. [7] Further, they maintained, 'Article 370 gave

a special status to Jammu and Kashmir which served to strengthen and confirm the feeling that Kashmiris are not Indians and also helps to keep alive the uncertainty in their minds about the future of the State'. [8] Interestingly, the Kashmir Government justified the 'distinct identity' in the following terms: 'There is no doubt that the people of Kashmir "have made a decisive preference for a progressive secular ideal"...it should be realized that "Muslims of Kashmir are still subjected to the psychological and religious pulls from Pakistan. In order to wean them away from such influences, it is absolutely necessary to guarantee their political freedom".[9] The 'special status' is merely a slender bridge which has allowed India to hold on to Kashmir.

A sense of impermanence of partition resonated among people due to the reference of the plebiscite to determine the final status of the state. While after the partition of the subcontinent people 'felt compelled to decide upon the unalloyed national attachments' [10], the 'Kashmiri National' stood at the margins of the process of ascribing definite identities.

While the Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah had hoped that the autonomous position of the state of Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian Union would safeguard and preserve Kashmiri identity, immense pressure was retained on Sheikh Abdullah's government through the *Praja Parishad* movement to fully integrate the State with Indian Union. As Sheikh Abdullah began to vacillate and talk of Kashmir's independence from both the nation-states by 1953, a role reversal took place within the Indian nationalist discourses. The nationalist discourses, which had once represented Sheikh Abdullah as the secular democrat who led the States' People's Conference, now condemned him as a 'religious zealot', a fanatic, who conspired with Pakistan to subvert the accession of the State to Indian Union. [11]

It was the agitation against Sheikh Abdullah's government by Hindu extremists (Praja Parishad, supported by Bharatiya Jana Sangh) which apparently solidified Sheikh's doubts and inclined him to favor independence for the state. [12] After this disposition, Sheikh Abdullah's free days were numbered. He was arrested and charged with conspiracy. The *New York Times* correspondent, reported on Sheikh's arrest saying, 'The world already knows that what the "Lion of Kashmir" proposed was a free vote. If that is a crime, then India's claims to Kashmir is obviously an arbitrary seizure of power and falls of its own justice.' [13] It became clear, in Mridu Rai's words, that 'the homogenizing Indian nation's version of accommodating difference had become synonymous with the command issued to alternative identities that they erase themselves'. [14]

In an Orwellian sense, 'nationalism is inseparable from power'. Orwell's idea of a nationalist is one who secures power and prestige but essentially partakes his/[her] individuality in their attempt to serve the nation. Whether a 'nationalist' sinks her individuality in this ideal or assume that nations and individuals are ontologically analogous, is another debate, for another time. The vociferous 'blah-blahing' of nationalist discourse in the Indian public domain over the past few years has brought home the reality that it indeed is not only impossible to separate 'nationalism'[Hindu nationalism, in this case] from power, but it also empowers every individual 'nationalist' to eliminate the 'Other' which in the eyes of the Hindu 'nationalists' is either a beef-eating Indian Muslim, a Dalit, or a Kashmiri!

One only needs to be reminded of Nietzsche, who had warned of the virulent power of the modern state.Nietzsche viewed the modern state with a special repugnance, as 'something which threatens to acquire the position of an ' earthly god' and argued that the modern state is a power which intimidated the man into conformity. It is no surprise when Bharatiya Janata Party's National General Secretary, Ram Madhav espouses, 'instilling India in Kashmiris', even if it means by the force of a bayonet. When people of the State demand political right to decide their future, which according to the Indian State is couched in a religious idiom, they come in conflict with the Indian State's image of a 'secular' state. In these sites of contestations with the Indian State, the demand for a reconfiguration of political subjectivity [15] of Kashmiris is simply dubbed as 'communal' or even as guided by religious 'fanaticism/fundamentalism'.

Kashmir's political landscape represents a mere picturesque dilapidation presently. The colonial constructions of Kashmir as "the most romantic region of the east" or "the Happy Valley", "Switzerland of the east" et al, and the post-colonial apocalyptic imagery of Kashmir as a vibrant mise-en-scene with tulip gardens and sunsets in the background, contrasts starkly with the grim realities of the violent practices and structures in place in Kashmir, which are as intricate as calligraphy. When I asked a Kashmiri about the ongoing situation in Kashmir, her response was, "*Jabr-o-zulm, qatl-o-girat*" (death, destruction and tyranny). Artful yet tragic, this Urdu phrase reflects the story of minutiae of everyday life in Kashmir.

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[1] Further on this see works like, Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*(London, 2010); Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy, 1846-1990* (Hertingfordbury, 1991); Prem Shankar Jha, *Kashmir 1947: The Origins of a Dispute* (New Delhi, 2003). In October 1947, the state of Jammu and Kashmir provisionally acceded to the Indian Union, the final decision of which was meant to be decided by plebiscite, a public vote.

[2] Besides parts of 'British India' directly under the British colonial rule, certain pockets in the Indian subcontinent were directly ruled by the princes. There were as many as 564 princely states on eve of India's partition in 1947.

[3] In one of the districts in Kashmir, the District Magistrate stamped the hand of a person granting him permission to use the highway on the particular day of the ban.

[4] I have used the term "ruins" which the scholar, Ann Laura Stoler uses to describe it in terms of the 'imperial debris' reflected in material objects. Here I treat the Kashmiri body in itself a 'ruin'.

[5] 'Representation received regarding Praja Parishad Agitation', Ministry of States, 1953, File No. 8 (21)-K/53, National Archives of India, p. 10.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] 'Praja Parishad Agitation in Jammu 1953', Publicity Department, 1953, File No. VI/6/169, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

[8] *Ibid,* 'Parishad Men to Wait on Nehru: Plea for Repeal of Article 370', Press Cutting, Times of India, Delhi, 18 Aug 1962, p. 11.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Yasmin Khan, 'The Ending of an Empire: From Imagined Communities to Nation States in India and Pakistan', *The Round Table*, 97:398, 2008, p. 701.

[11] *Times Of India* , Delhi, 29 April, 1964, p. 1.

[12] 'Abdullah and Aide Seized in Kashmir: Ghulam Mohammad is Named Premier in Shift Laid to Sheikh's Split with India', The New York Times, New York, 10 Aug 1953, p. 3.

[13] 'Kashmir's "Lion" on Trial', NYT, Oct 26, 1958, p 8.

[14] Mridu Rai, *Hindu Rulers Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights, and the History of Kashmir* (Hurst & Company, London, 2004), p. 285.

[15] Subjectivity is used here to refer to the consciousness of understanding the self, the lived experiences and the world that the self inhabits. It denotes the formation of Kashmiri subjectivity in the political act of resisting and questioning their subjection by the Indian State.

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